

# **Nineteenth-Century Dialect Literature: A Voice of the People? The Case of The Shevild Chap**

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The study of nineteenth-century dialect literature in Britain has been somewhat neglected, despite the plethora of surviving primary source material from the period. In a recent edited collection dedicated to the subject, Jane Hodson has suggested that, in part, academic work on the subject has fallen through a number of disciplinary “gaps”, resulting both in its relative neglect by academics and also a tendency for the work that is produced not to engage directly with other, potentially related, scholarship since it has been generated in a different subject area.<sup>1</sup> This article seeks to contribute to this relatively sparse scholarship by examining the output of a Sheffield-based nineteenth-century dialect writer, Abel Bywater (1795-1873) whose work, often written under the *nom de plume*, *The Shevild Chap*, appeared to challenge some of the orthodoxies that have developed relating to the genre.

After giving some attention to the extent of working class literature in the first half of the nineteenth century a brief definition of “dialect” will be offered and the effectiveness of representing dialect in writing will be considered. Evidence of the popularity of dialect literature in the nineteenth century will then be sought, with a particular emphasis upon the output of the dialect writers of Lancashire and Yorkshire. This survey of the dialect literature will serve to place the work of *The Shevild Chap* into context and will allow an assessment to be made of the degree to which his dialect writing was characteristic of the genre. Particular attention will be paid to the appropriateness of the use of dialect by *The Shevild Chap* in the subject matter he explored and, equally, his reasons for writing in Standard English, on occasion, will be examined before a final conclusion will be made of his significance in representing the lives and motivations of the Sheffield people in the first fifty years or so of the nineteenth century.

Contrary to the popularly-held belief that widespread literacy did not become common until after the 1870 Education Act, a number of historians have shown that working class literacy rates before this date had been underestimated. In his influential work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson contended that “something like two out of three working men were able to read after some fashion in the early part of the [nineteenth] century.”<sup>2</sup> Such high levels of literacy, he explained, were the result of the teaching of Sunday schools and day schools, together with the “drive for self-improvement among working people themselves.”<sup>3</sup> R. K. Webb found that the literacy rate of the adult male working class was “hovering about the figures of two-thirds to three-quarters in the period 1790 to 1848.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Lawrence Stone in examining the rural East Riding, Bristol and Nottingham in the same period found, from basing his study on marriage registers, that adult male literacy rates did not fall below sixty percent in these districts.<sup>5</sup> By 1800, some 53% of the English population could sign their name.<sup>6</sup> David Vincent, amongst others,

however, has indicated the problems associated with assuming the ability to read from individuals' signatures. As Vincent notes: "The relationship between reading and writing is far from constant either over time or between cultures."<sup>7</sup> Thompson's brief survey of the early nineteenth century radical press revealed that, feeding this literary market, were a number of papers with healthy circulations: Cobbett's *2d Register* between October 1816 and February 1817 sold between 40,000 and 60,000 copies each week; the circulation of *The Black Dwarf* in 1819, on the eve of Peterloo, ran at 12,000.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, high levels of literacy and the relatively large circulations of such newspapers, each being read by – and to – large numbers of people, helped in the dissemination of radical ideas.

However, far from intending to spread radical ideas to the population at large, many of those involved in encouraging the learning of reading skills by the "lower classes" did so for quite a different reason, as a Sunday School tract of 1806 explained to its readership: "The learning we are to communicate is only intended to enable you to read the scriptures and to see that it is the will of God that you should be contented with your station."<sup>9</sup> Clearly, therefore, the reading material at the disposal of the working class in the early part of the nineteenth century was considerably varied, reflecting not only the disparate hopes of those in control of the printing presses, but also the demands of the reading public, many of whom, noted Webb, "did no reading at all beyond normal encounters with handbills or advertising. Others read only newspapers; still others read only to escape."<sup>10</sup> Amongst this varied popular printed material ranging from the radical newspapers to the conservative religious tracts was a considerable amount of dialect literature produced during the nineteenth century and aimed particularly for the consumption of the working class, especially in the fast-developing industrial areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Before examining examples of this type of writing, however, attention first needs to be paid to the essentially paradoxical term "dialect literature".

By its very nature, dialect is best represented in the spoken form when all its spontaneity and characteristics are most evident. Seeking to represent a dialect on paper is fraught with difficulties.<sup>11</sup> Since a phonetic alphabet was not used by the dialect writers of the nineteenth century, each author chose to represent the sound of a word idiosyncratically. Thus, two different spellings of a word – such as "wur" and "were" – need not necessarily imply a different pronunciation. Almost without exception, however, few of the writers of dialect literature were interested in representing to any scientifically high degree of accuracy the dialect of their locality. What was of more importance to them was the content of their writing and to convey some idea of the flavour of its expression to their readers. There is, therefore, a distinct difference in the objectives of the dialect writers and the antiquarians and dialectologists which is clearly evidenced in the frustrated remarks of the Sheffield antiquarian, S. O. Addy, in connection with the earlier writings of *The Shevild Chap*: "If people in Sheffield had been free from the idea that acquaintance with a provincial dialect is a thing to be ashamed of better specimens might have been available and more attention would have been given to the most interesting remains of the early language."<sup>12</sup> The *Sheffield Independent* made reference to the inadequacies of Bywater's rendering of the Sheffield

dialect soon after his death in October 1873. The newspaper observed that Abel Bywater was Sheffield's

“most voluminous, if least, writer of the vernacular ... It is no disrespect to The Shevvild Chap to say that the Rev. H. H. Piper's essay read in 1825 before the Literary and Philosophical Society and Mr Hunter's *Hallamshire Glossary* are from the word collector's point of view, worth all his amusing writings put together.”<sup>13</sup>

The following year, the same newspaper was a little more generous in its assessment of Bywater's dialect writings. It noted that “whatever the scientific shortcomings of Mr Bywater's efforts to perpetuate the vulgar tongue of his native town, they constitute one of the few honest and earnest attempts we possess in this direction.”<sup>14</sup> The *Sheffield Independent* went on to note that the ways in which Bywater sought to represent the dialect on the page “are at any rate more understandable to the ordinary reader than would be their conversion into Mr Ellis's more scientific “glossic” notation.” The need for the dialect to be captured in written form was identified by the newspaper which concluded that:

“the purity of our dialects is being so largely adulterated by the adoption of the one dead level of conventionalism that writings like Bywater's are distinctly valuable as preserving the raw material that enables the student to make those comparisons on which the study of dialects so much depends.”<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, then, as an accurate indicator of the dialect spoken in a district, dialect literature was thought to have little to commend it by contemporary scholars. As G. L. Brook commented: “The pronunciation of dialect is best studied at first hand, not through the medium of literary works.”<sup>16</sup> If, as Addy made clear in the case of The Shevvild Chap, the dialect writers did not pay significant detailed attention to, or possess intrinsic interest in, the dialect in which they wrote, and displayed no specific inclination to encourage the preservation of archaic dialect words through the use of such words in their writings, at least until the later nineteenth century, it seems necessary to search elsewhere for reasons for these writers' use of dialect in their work.

Nineteenth century dialect writing in the north of England appears to have been aimed particularly at the burgeoning urban areas. West of the Pennines, two of the leading exponents of dialect writing were Rochdale-born Edwin Waugh (1819-90) whose dialect poetry, according to Martha Vicinus, “reminds his predominantly city audience of a happier past.”<sup>17</sup> and Ben Brierley (1825-96) who wrote dialect prose and became famous for his comic sketches of working class urban life, involving his fictional character “Ab'o'th'Yate”, who lived near to the centre of Manchester. In the West Riding, in addition to The Shevvild Chap's success, a number of other dialect writers wrote prolifically and enjoyed much local acclaim. Perhaps the most successful of the Yorkshire dialect writers was John Hartley (1839-1915), whose Halifax almanac *The Original Illuminated Clock Almanack* reputedly

sold 75,000 copies per issue.<sup>18</sup> Other dialect writers of the West Riding included Tom Treddlehoyle, who wrote *The Bairnsla Foaks' Annual*<sup>19</sup> and Bradford-born Ben Preston (1819-1902), whose dialect poetry concentrated on the plight of the poor.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst the production of such dialect literature aimed at a rapidly expanding urban market undoubtedly had some degree of commercial motive, the significance of its dialectal nature needs further consideration. As a consequence of the unparalleled growth in the size of towns such as Sheffield and Manchester during the nineteenth century, large-scale migration was necessary to offset the high death rates and to sustain the urban population growth. In 1851, less than half of the population had been born in the town<sup>21</sup> and in Sheffield 49% of the population over twenty years of age had been born outside the borough boundaries.<sup>22</sup> The popularity of dialect literature in these expanded industrialised areas, it has been claimed, is in some part explained by its effectiveness in highlighting the common experiences of the local population. A counter-argument might contend that in a community containing so much migrant labour, the appeal of dialect literature would be limited. However, extensive work on census returns in some industrial communities has suggested that a considerable amount of this migration was over short distances.<sup>23</sup> Brian Hollingworth, in *Songs of the People*, explained that the appeal of dialect writers lay in the fact that they were writing “for the people in the language of the people: they attempted to capture their thoughts and their feelings in the very language the people themselves would naturally have used.”<sup>24</sup> In his detailed analysis of nineteenth century dialect literature and the making of social identity, Patrick Joyce emphasises how dialect writing frequently focussed upon family life, marriage, and the home.<sup>25</sup> Joyce noted how within such literature, instead of recurring references to “class”, collective terms such as “people”, “working folk”, or just plain “folk” predominated.<sup>26</sup>

The exclusivity of dialect literature is evident both in the language used and in the characters represented. Rarely does anybody feature in the dialogue of such literature from outside the locality. Where outsiders do appear their linguistic differences and variations in manners are shown by the dialect writers. Invariably the outsiders are of a superior standing in society than the local population, but nevertheless the local characters, obviously to the delight of the readership, generally are shown holding their own in the company of these visitors. John Hartley, for instance, wrote of the visit of a school inspector:

“Aw heard a bit sin abaat a schooil inspector up i’ Scammonden, who war hearin’ childer ther geography. ‘What are the names of the principal English loikes?’ he axed. ‘Fooitball laikin’, nur and spell laikin’, pitch an’ toss an’ prize feightin’” sed a lad abaat eight year owd.”<sup>27</sup>

Royalty made a somewhat surprising entry into the world of dialect literature in examples from both Yorkshire and Lancashire. Unlike other outsiders mentioned in dialect literature, Queen Victoria and her family were portrayed sympathetically and much concern was expressed concerning their domestic arrangements. Dialect literature contained advice for the royal family given both directly and indirectly. It also contained reservations about the

quality of advice offered to the royal family by its aristocratic courtiers. Ben Brierley wrote of a visit by the young Prince of Wales to the fictitious industrial community of Walmsley Fold:

“Everybody pities him an’ said what a shaum it wur ut a poor delicate lad like him should be dragged abeaut th’ country by a lot o’ chops ut thowt more abeaut usin’ a knife an’ fork nor owt else ... Mother Confessor said ‘If the Prince had bin browt up i’ Walmersley Fowt an’ had to feight for his buttercakes he’d ha taken more cloth for his cloas nur he does neaw. That’s the place for eddicatin’ em boath i’ th’ yead an’ th’ body...’ ”<sup>28</sup>

In “The Queen and Sir Ab’ O’ Th’ Yate” Ben Brierley sought to portray Victoria as approachable and informed about her subjects in Walmsley Fold, which, she recalled, was “celebrated for cheap beef if I’m not mistaken.”<sup>29</sup>

Writing considerably earlier in Victoria’s reign, The Shevvild Chap offered some rather startling advice to the Queen, following the birth of the Prince of Wales in 1842 in “Dame Flatback’s Oration on the Birth of the Prince of Wales”. Dame Flatback, her name derived from a Sheffield knife, was portrayed as an elderly wise Sheffield woman who wrote annually to the queen in *The Shevvild Chap’s Annual*. She began her letter:

“My dear Queen ... do yo tak care a yer sen ... if yo can’t suckle him yer sen, moind an get yer breasts drawn three or four toimes a day; bless ya moind ya hav’n’t bad breasts, nor moind yo dooant get t’milk faver. O aver he’ll want to suck summada an see an tak care at he sucks summada worth suckin’; becos it’s a foine thing for a woman to say at shoo suckled England’s king ... An just a word abaht muzzles; they’re varra much abaht just nah ... If he should happen to have em be sure an yo get a good doctor to him ...”<sup>30</sup>

In their characterisation of Queen Victoria, the dialect writers aimed to show their readers the similarities that existed between them and royalty: like them the queen was shown involved in domestic matters and, as made clear by The Shevvild Chap, Victoria was to be seen as a woman eager to learn the skills of maternity from her subjects. In much of this dialect literature it seems that generally the similarities between the readers and the monarch were stressed in an attempt perhaps to increase the self-confidence and self-respect of its readership. However, in “Dame Flatback’s Annual Epistle to the Queen” in 1843, The Shevvild Chap does not disguise the gulf in the social position between that of Victoria and the Sheffield people. In the letter, Dame Flatback encouraged the queen to begin using Sheffield knives in her cooking. This, she believed, would stimulate demand for the product and so rescue Wadsley and its people from an economic slump. “If yo’ll nobbut begin a yusing ahr flatbacks”, she suggests, “we’st sooin be able to boil t’pot ageean an’ have some troipe for us Setterday neet supper.”<sup>31</sup> After this recognition of the queen’s powers of influence, however, again the common experiences of the two women are highlighted, as

Dame Flatback concludes her letter in an informal conventional manner with an inquiry about the health and development of the royal family.

The quotidian nature of dialect literature has been much remarked upon by commentators. Hollingworth, in *Songs of the People*, wrote of dialect literature that “its subject matter was always ‘homely’ ... [and] avoided the conventional and grander subjects of poetry to record the life of ‘simple’ and ‘unregarded’ men.”<sup>32</sup> Martha Vicinus, too, noted its “concentration upon the ‘familiar’ and ‘homely’.”<sup>33</sup> In Lancashire examples of the genre, Brierley’s Ab’ showed contentment with his wife, affectionately calling her “me owd rib”. Samuel Laycock and Sam Fitton respectively in Bowton’s Yard and Cotton Fowd, wrote about the ordinary people in their home streets, affectionately relating to their readers the virtues and small vices of their neighbours. Such subject matter inevitably struck a chord with readers whose own experiences often closely resembled those written about in the texts. To the reader, as G. L. Brook observed, the appeal of such familiar tales was enhanced by the use of dialect which “enables him to fit the story into its context of human character and behaviour. He is able to think of people that he knows who would have made just such a reply and he is able to derive satisfaction from thinking how well it fits with some aspect of their character.”<sup>34</sup>

Many of the tales told by The Shevvild Chap similarly were placed in a familiar setting to his readers. Some of his vignettes, such as “The Gossips Tea Drinking”, were set in a working class street and were based upon rituals familiar to his readers, whilst others were based in the workplace, usually “uppa are hull arston” – at our hull hearthstone, in a grinder’s workshop, where the conversation usually involved two workers, Jack Wheelswharf and Bill Heftpoip. The Lancashire dialect writers, many of whom focussed upon the textile-working districts, rarely used the workplace as the scene for their writing, principally because of the nature of the work. This involved the use of noisy machinery in the spinning and weaving processes particularly, which together with the factory discipline, made casual conversation amongst workers difficult. No such major problems prevailed in the Sheffield workshops, where the “little mesters” were often portrayed as being answerable only to their wives.<sup>35</sup>

By concentrating upon the “homely” and “familiar” aspects of the lives of their readers, the writers of dialect literature gave a legitimacy to, and some type of acknowledgement of, the way of life led by the industrial working class. Edwin Waugh wrote that, as a dialect writer, he saw it as his task to give folks “a lift on the way”.<sup>36</sup> Ben Brierley was seen as a spokesman from and for the working class.<sup>37</sup> The dignity and worth of the working people was a subject upon which The Shevvild Chap himself occasionally dwelt, most notably perhaps in two articles in the *Supplement To The Shevvild Chap’s Annual for 1845*. Here, he lamented the long hours of work enforced upon many men and women which prevented them from fulfilling their undoubted intellectual potential: “O tempora, O mores! Nobbut just think a wot all these moinds is capable a doin’.”<sup>38</sup> The inclusion of the Latin phrase and the content of the article suggests that his particular piece of dialect writing was

produced for an audience other than the workers. Similarly, his indignant reply to the Cutlers' feast address was aimed at the speaker, Earl Fitzwilliam, who had called the working men of Sheffield ignorant. "It's true we hav'n't had a college eddication", wrote The Shevvild Chap testily, "by we'n eddicated us sens, an menny on us has done this when lords an dukes has been e bed or else at their revels; an we can gobble grammar an talk logic uppa menny a subject at they kno'n nowt abaht." <sup>39</sup>

The use of the first-person plural in this last extract is rather problematic. Evidently, in this piece of writing, The Shevvild Chap identified himself with the working class, yet his writing elsewhere and the available information in existence referring to The Shevvild Chap suggests that his position within society was not quite so straightforward. S. O. Addy referred to a memoir by Albert Middleton when he sought further information about The Shevvild Chap, who, he discovered, "was born in 1795, that he was apprenticed to an awl blade maker, that he afterwards became a chemist and druggist, and that he died at the age of 78." <sup>40</sup> In his book, *The Sheffield Dialect*, written in 1839, Abel Bywater revealed himself to be The Shevvild Chap. Although, as Middleton stated, Bywater had been apprenticed as an awl blade maker, it is clear from surviving records that The Shevvild Chap was far from being a representative working class citizen of Sheffield. In the Sheffield trade directories Abel Bywater appeared as a chemist and druggist as early as 1839, where his address was given. By 1856, and in subsequent directories, Bywater's business as a chemist had obviously expanded, as two addresses were listed. In the census returns of 1851 and 1861 Bywater was described as a "druggist" whilst in the return of 1841, he was recorded as being an "awl blade maker". Yet the trade directory of 1841 had listed him as a "shopkeeper and druggist". With these activities, together with his writing, it is clear that Bywater could not be regarded as being a representative member of the class for whom he had claimed to speak. Indeed, his move to Ecclesall Road, the appointment of his son as a schoolmaster and the apparent leisure of his wife and daughters suggest that Bywater's position both financially and socially was considerably better than that of the majority of his readers. In this respect, The Shevvild Chap shared much in common with Ben Brierley, who rose to be a town councillor for a ward in the city of Manchester.

As early as 1839, Bywater revealed in *The Sheffield Dialect* a somewhat *de haut en bas* approach to his working-class readers. The preface to *The Sheffield Dialect*, written in Standard English, reads almost like a manifesto, explaining to the more cerebral citizens of Sheffield what he sought to achieve through his dialect writing. This, he wrote, gave

"access to the very lowest of society and thus directed our energies against the principles of infidels. We also kept up a close fire against that wretched crime which is such a stain upon our country, *viz.* drunkenness; and hence *The Temperance Chronicles* appeared; and 'to unfold the principles of good living in private life', out came the Gossips; and last of all some caricatures upon Owenism."

Bywater continued, most candidly,

“Having had such evil principles to contend against, our readers will see that in some parts of our little work we have not paid very much attention to the Dialect; for this omission, if it be one, we must beg the indulgence of our numerous friends.”<sup>41</sup>

It seems, therefore, that The Shevvild Chap placed more importance upon proselytising than upon the accurate rendition of the local dialect.

Much of Bywater’s published material connected with religious subjects such as freethinking and the activities of secularists such as Richard Carlile was written in Standard English. The titles of such pieces suggest that this literature was not aimed specifically at the “very lowest of society”. *Multum in Parvo. The Poser: A Complete Refutation of the Philosophy of Atheism and Deism* was a pamphlet written by Bywater in 1836 which tackled the issue of atheism and voiced his concern about its adoption by the middle classes and the effect this could have upon their social “inferiors”. “The open attacks which have been made on religion by men who pretend to be very sagacious”, he wrote, “have greatly increased profaneness among the lower ranks in society.” Turning his attention to the lower classes and clearly not regarding himself as a member of that section of society, Bywater continued: “if they have cast off the ties of religion and are abandoned to their own unrestrained passions what are they not capable of?”<sup>42</sup>

In his treatment of such subjects as freethinking, Bywater revealed an ability to manipulate his readers through his own deftness and apparent insight into their motivations. Whilst he urged the more powerful members of society to reject secularism, explaining that with its adoption “all the bonds that hold society together are in danger of being dissolved,”<sup>43</sup> in his dialect writing Bywater made constant reference to the break-up of the family, which he claimed, using the example of Richard Carlile, inevitably resulted from the adoption of freethinking. In *A Conversation Between The Shevvild Chap and a Freethinker*, The Shevvild Chap put forward a stout defence of Christianity:

“The principles of the Boible are to do justly to love, mercy an to walk humbly we yore God. Have yo owt wot al mak men better husbands, or women better woives, or better childer, or better servants. Husbands love yor wives. Can yo mend that? Carlile left his woif an travelled throo’t country we a prostitute; an’ his agent in Shevvild did the same.”<sup>44</sup>

Writing as The Shevvild Chap, Bywater attacked both Catholicism and the immoderation of teetotalism in a similarly unsophisticated, somewhat coarse manner. The arguments advanced by Bywater in his dialect literature, it seems, from his more composed published work in Standard English, should not be regarded as those held by himself but were the means by which he attempted to persuade his dialect readers to adopt a particular viewpoint, albeit often for somewhat irrational reasons. The Shevvild Chap’s attack on teetotalism is worthy of consideration. In his *Reasons for Drinking Ale (moderately) and Wine (when he can get it)*, The Shevvild Chap portrayed Jack Wheelswharf “uppa are hull

arston” expounding to his friend Bil Heftpoip upon the subject of teetotalism. “If ivver there’s anna practicable system browt into operation for the benefit of man it’s almost sure to be carried to an extreme”, he lamented. “I am told by these charitable tee-total men that because I think proper to take a little of either ale or wine when I can get it that I am worse than a drunkard.”<sup>45</sup> This quite gentle criticism of the immoderation of the teetotal movement was later replaced by a much more damning personal attack upon teetotalism’s exponents. Jack Wheelswharf spoke of the

“teetotal exhibition at Surrey Gardens, Lunnun ...[where] they transmogrified thersens into a teetotal kissing ring; there wor’t young lads an lasses a’t owd lads and lasses, married an single, it maks no difference; a lad walks another man’s woif haht an kisses her i’t ring, an a married man dost same be a single girl; an isent this all vary innocent.”<sup>46</sup>

Such malicious, generally unfounded, attacks made by The Shevvild Chap were in great contrast to the more considered Standard English outpourings of his *alter ego*, Abel Bywater, and strongly counter the claim of G. L. Brook that dialect literature “deals with homely things in a homely way.”<sup>47</sup> The Shevvild Chap, on a number of occasions, used dialect literature as a vehicle for the conveyance of barely-concealed bigotry. In *A Papish Discussion*, The Shevvild Chap employed a stereotypical Irishman to assist him in advancing an anti-papal message:

“Jack Wheelswharf: O say, Bil, thah’l have a bit a popery directly here’s Patrick O’Rafferty comin’  
Bil Heftpoip: Wa O wer at their church last neet.  
Pat (entering) Well now, an how did ye like the minister last night?  
Bil: Oh, he’s a vary noist oily-faced lookin’ man, O think.  
Pat: O yes, ye’re right: he’s a fine man; he can say anthin he likes; he’s never fast.  
Bil: There’s not many a yore priests wot is.  
Pat: O no, he handled his subject well, didn’t he?  
Bil: Adder say there wor a menay there wot thowt sooa.  
Pat: Why now, didn’t you think so? Didn’t he prove his subject?  
Bil: He did – as clear as mud.  
Pat: Yes, an shure enough he did. O he’s a foine man an he belongs to the rale church. Ye know, ours is the throe church.”<sup>48</sup>

Evidently, in such a context the dialect literature was used effectively to mark out the Irishman as different. Here, the dialectal differences are evident in the pronunciation of words and in their lexical use: “fast”, for instance, in the above extract was obviously a word which had a different meaning for the Irishman, although, significantly, it seems that the local character, Bil, was aware of the word’s double meaning. The passage continued in much the same manner with the Irishman being subjected to further ridicule before Jack Wheelswharf concluded contemptuously: “Wa Bil, lad, he’s a genuine specimen of a priest ridden Irishman

whose faith is in his priest, an whose ignorance of the plan of salvation by Jesus Christ is as the darkness that might be felt.”

The Shevvild Chap’s writings spanned a period of over thirty years, beginning it appears in the 1820s and continuing at least until 1861 with the publication of his annual for that year. Evidently, therefore, The Shevvild Chap was successful in finding a market for his regular outpourings. The extent to which his dialect literature was successful in reaching the readers he sought to capture, “the lower ranks of society”, is a question that demands to be addressed. Little evidence exists, however, from which to draw conclusions. The subject matter of the dialect literature he produced, much of which contained, as has been shown, references to religious observance, temperance – as opposed to teetotalism – and the working class street, in addition to the occasional defensive piece about the dignity of labour, suggests that the readers The Shevvild Chap hoped to attract were members of the “respectable” working class. Significantly, much of The Shevvild Chap’s dialect writing centred around Jack Wheelsharf and Bil Heftpoip in their small workshop, a familiar scene to many of Sheffield’s grinders and cutlers. Here, “uppa are hull arston”, many of the issues that occupied the minds of “respectable working men”, such as religion and rational recreation were often discussed. Bil Heftpoip’s forthright views on prize fighters signified the concerns of the middle class, no less than the more “responsible” members of the working class. Discussing the *London Bulldog Fighting Gazette*, Bil Heftpoip raged:

“Now o wuddent suffer that thing cum within seven moil a mo hahce if o cud help it; o wuddent use it now not even fort dirtiest use at paper can be put to. O think it a national pest – a national curse – a disgrace tot press as well ast country. O think it the blackest, the most demoraloizin, the varra foulest production in circulation; an if ivver there should be a reason for curcin the art of printin it ad be becos sitch a mass of corruption wer suffer’d tin it ad be becos sitch a mass of corruption wer suffere’d to contaminate the moinds of the roisin generation.”<sup>49</sup>

Such pieces of bitter criticism voiced by The Shevvild Chap’s characters evidently did not please all of his potential readers. “A Silversmith” wrote an effective, somewhat satirical, piece attacking The Shevvild Chap in the dialect style that Bywater had apparently made his own:

“He’s neer been nowt bur a slaundering skandalashon pest to’t tane ivver sin he begun a publick loife. Nobuddy kan blawah ther nooas but he starts a blaiting ... You kant pleas yer sens an get drunk bur he maks a puppy show on you too all tane at a pennie a piece; nor go tut pump to drink watter, then he’s off to t’Hi’ Street, ant printer an him jowls ther hehads together an aht cums a ‘Jack an’ Bil’ ... He’s allas thrawing aht his slang thro Windsor Castle down too a Barber’s Shop. Call him a Kristian, he’s nowt bur an ass we long hears wot grazies it Park.”<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, at least one reader found the exhortations of The Shevvild Chap rather overbearing. However, another writer, John Holland, a member of Sheffield's intelligentsia, wrote approvingly of Abel Bywater's dialect writings and noted that Bywater had been a labourer himself. In a posthumously-printed article, published in 1873, entitled "Sparks from a Sheffield Anvil", Holland portrayed Sheffield grinders almost as "noble savages". He noted that they were "athletic figures with brown-paper turbans", "their shirt collars open, displaying their broad dark hairy chests". Occasionally, amongst the grinders, he observed, "a solitary ruminator with a book, but much oftener with a pipe". Holland reported that "these unpolished grinders speak a *patois* as primitive as their manners; and unusually one of their class – Abel Bywater – has embodied it in a series of 'Conversations uppa ar Hull Artstone'."

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It seems, then, that Abel Bywater's somewhat ambiguous position in society holds the key to understanding his dialect writing under the name of The Shevvild Chap. Undoubtedly, his early years as an awl blade maker's apprentice and the first part of his married life in South Street, Park, had much in common with many of the "very lowest of society", whom he sought to attract as his dialect readers. Yet even as early as 1839, whilst still living in South Street with his large, young family, Abel Bywater in his book *The Sheffield Dialect* made it clear that he did not perceive himself to be a member of that section of society, despite the later observations of John Holland. Abel Bywater's move to 117 Ecclesall Road, where he spent the largest part of his married life, was obviously considered by Bywater to be more congenial, and enabled him to enjoy his life as a chemist and prolific writer in a more comfortable residential area.

Writing as Abel Bywater, and employing Standard English, his work appealed to a different readership from his dialect output. The principal difference between the two types of writing undertaken by Bywater was in the complexity of the arguments advanced: the general subject matter of the writing in many instances was much the same. Issues such as secularism, Catholicism, Owenism, and temperance were regularly aired both in the Standard English of Abel Bywater and the dialect of The Shevvild Chap. The latter, however, tended to tackle such subjects indirectly, concealing them in the familiar quotidian scenes that lent themselves so well to the pen of the competent dialect writer.

Yet despite the use of the local dialect in an attempt to appeal to the "lowest ranks of society", the ploy evidently was not altogether successful. In addition to the criticism made by "A Silversmith", Abel Bywater himself, in his preface to *The Sheffield Dialect*, admitted to overhearing someone speculating in a public house about the identity of The Shevvild Chap, who announced, "O kno for a fact at it wer written by one at parsons." Evidently, the sermonising contained within the dialect writing of Abel Bywater had not escaped the notice of some of his working class readers, who felt that The Shevvild Chap at most sympathised rather than empathised with their position. Nevertheless, although it seems that the dialect writing of The Shevvild Chap cannot be regarded as the authentic voice of the people for

whom he aimed to write, the content of his writing gives the present day reader an illuminating picture of the everyday life led by Sheffield people nearly two centuries ago. Such pieces as “The Gossips Tea Drinking” and Dame Flatback’s letters to the queen reveal much about the rituals of home life that were rarely reported elsewhere.

It would be wrong, however, to mistake dialect literature’s preoccupation with “familiar” subjects as a sign of its “homely” nature, which many writers on the subject have done. Just as familiar as the “homely” topics explored by dialect writers such as Edwin Waugh and Ben Brierley were examples of bigotry and prejudice that equally lent themselves to expression in the dialect. The Shevvild Chap did not balk at the task of reflecting such widely-held feelings, as his writings on subjects such as Catholicism and strict teetotalism have shown. A cautionary note needs to be added to any examination of nineteenth-century dialect literature. Because of its ephemeral nature, many examples of dialect literature have not survived and a question must, therefore, be asked about the representative nature of that which is extant. In the case of Abel Bywater, over fifty pieces of his published work are listed in the Sheffield City Local History Library index, yet it seems fair to assume, taking into account his high productivity levels, that Bywater wrote other pieces as well. That which does survive was often bought by libraries or has been donated to them. “A Conversation Between The Shevvild Chap and a Freethinker”, for example, published in 1858, was presented to a Sheffield library by the Reverend Carus Vale Collier M.A.. By their very nature, such surviving examples of dialect literature tend to be perceived by the donors and recipients as amongst the more “wholesome” and “instructive” examples. The “homeliness” of dialect literature seems to have been greatly exaggerated.

## Notes

1. J. Hodson, “Introduction”, in J. Hodson, ed., *Dialect and Literature in the Long Nineteenth Century*, London, Routledge, 2017, p. 2.
2. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963, p. 793.
3. Thompson, p. 789.
4. R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790-1843*, London, George Allen and Unwin, p. 22.
5. Lawrence Stone, “Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900”, *Past & Present*, vol. 42, no. 1 (February 1st, 1969), 69-139.
6. R. C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 12.
7. D. Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 10.
8. Thompson, p. 789.
9. Stone, 91.
10. Webb, p. 35.
11. See, for instance, J. D. A. Widdowson, “Some Elementary Problems of Phonetic Transcription”, *Tradition Today*, no. 2 (September, 2012), 57-69.

12. S. O. Addy, *A Glossary of Words Used in the Neighbourhood of Sheffield*, London, English Dialect Society, 1888, p. xviii.
13. *Sheffield Independent*, February 17th, 1876.
14. *Sheffield Independent*, November 29th, 1877. Alexander John Ellis (1814-1890) was an early phonetician and author of *A Plea for Phonetic Spelling or The Necessity of Orthographic Reform*, 2nd edn, London, Pitman, 1848.
15. *Sheffield Independent*, November 29th, 1877.
16. G. L. Brook, *English Dialects*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1963, p. 209.
17. M. Vicinus, "Literary Voices of an Industrial Town", in H. J. Dyos, and M. Wolff, eds, *The Victorian City*, vol. 2, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 752.
18. John Waddington-Feather, *The Yorkshire Dialect*, Skipton, Dalesman Publishing, 1970, p. 46. On John Hartley's work, see for instance: R. Dimpleby, *Discovering John Hartley's Clock Almanacks, 1867-1916*, Wakefield, Charlesworth Press, 2014, and A. Walker, "'My Native Twang': Identities and the West Riding Nineteenth-Century Dialect Literature of John Hartley and 'The Shevild Chap'", in Alyson Brown, ed., *Historical Perspectives on Social Identities*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006, pp. 23-44.
19. Waddington-Feather, p. 47.
20. Brook, p. 194.
21. Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation*, 2nd edn, London, Methuen, 1983, p. 178.
22. Sidney Pollard, *A History of Labour in Sheffield*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1959, p. 6.
23. See works such as Michael Anderson's *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971.
24. Brian Hollingworth, *Songs of the People*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1977, p. 1.
25. P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England the Question of Class, 1840-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 289.
26. Joyce, p. 280.
27. Waddington-Feather, p. 47.
28. Ben Brierley, "The Royal Visit", in *Ab' o' th' Yate Sketches*, vol. III, Oldham, W. E. Clegg, 1896, pp. 29-36.
29. Brierley, "The Queen and Sir Ab' o' th' Yate", in *Ab' o' th' Yate Sketches*, vol. III, Oldham, W. E. Clegg, 1896, pp. 187-193.
30. The Shevild Chap, *The Prince of Wales' Almanack for the Year of Our Lord, 1842*, Sheffield, Chaloner, 1842.
31. The Shevild Chap, *Dame Flatback's Annual Epistle*, 1842.
32. Hollingworth, p. 1.
33. Vicinus, 1973, p. 752.
34. Brook, p. 28.
35. "The Jovial Cutlers", in P. S. Smith, D. A. E. Spalding, and F. Sutton, eds, *Cum All Yo' Cutlin' Heroes*, Sheffield, Sheffield City Museum, 1967.
36. Vicinus, 1973, p. 753.
37. *Ibid.*
38. The Shevild Chap, "A Code of Laws", *Supplement to Shevild Chap's Annual, 1845*, Sheffield, Chaloner, 1845.
39. The Shevild Chap, "A Tickler for Earl Fitzwilliam", *Supplement to Shevild Chap's Annual, 1845*, Sheffield, Chaloner, 1845.
40. Addy, p. xiv.
41. Abel Bywater, *The Sheffield Dialect*, Sheffield, Chaloner, 1839, p. iv.

42. Abel Bywater, *Multum in Parvo. The Poser: A Complete Refutation of the Philosophy of Atheism and Deism*, Sheffield, Saxton and Chaloner, 1836.
43. Bywater, 1836.
44. The Shevild Chap, *A Conversation Between The Shevild Chap and a Freethinker*, Sheffield, 1858.
45. The Shevild Chap, *Reasons for Drinking Ale (Moderately) and Wine (When He Can Get It)*, Sheffield, Chaloner, n.d..
46. *The Shevild Chap's Annual, 1854*, Sheffield, Rodgers, 1854.
47. Brook, p. 191.
48. The Shevild Chap, "A Papish Discussion", *The Shevild Chap's Christmas Present*, c1851.
49. *The Shevild Chap's Opinion Abaht Thease Proize Ring Feiters An' That Set*, Sheffield, Saxton and Chaloner, 1838.
50. A. Silversmith, *A Balus For a Chap i't Park What Isn't Habel to Buy Water Wee Ahr Filosofikal Hoppingons Uppa't Parsons, Kristianity etc.*, Sheffield, n.d..
51. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, July 29th, 1873.

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